Helping Workers Handle the Hazards of Isolation

How do you protect workers who work alone? One part of the answer is to assess the risks they face when they perform jobs in isolation and establish safe work procedures.

But that's not all you can or should do. You should also teach workers how to assess hazards themselves. Here's one way to do that.

The Hazards of Working Alone

Working alone means performing a job in isolation without the prospect of being able to receive immediate help in case of injury, illness or threat. Needless to say, working alone is extremely dangerous and even life-threatening. Imagine that a worker is alone at work and they:

- Are suddenly overcome by an odorless and invisible gas;
- Fall from a scaffold; or,
- Are threatened by an assailant.

In a worst case scenario, no one knows that they are working alone and hours can go by before:

- They are reported missing;
- The next shift comes on duty; or,
- They are found dead.

Protecting Isolated Workers Is a Two-Way Street

Working alone is dangerous because it heightens the risks inherent in the job. This is true whether the work involves travel, working with toxic substances, handling money or any other conditions; it's true whether the individual working alone is male or female. The job of protecting the worker is a shared responsibility between employer and worker.

It is the employer's job to provide instructions to the worker and to ensure that others are aware of the worker's whereabouts and schedule. The employer must also furnish a means of communication that at a minimum enables the worker to call for help.

But workers who work alone also have an important role to play in protecting

themselves. Specifically, they can take precautions to ensure they’re ready for eventualities that cannot be anticipated and that they keep their heads and show common sense when and if these unforeseen events arise.